

## The Naming of Cats by pathvain\_aelien

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**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

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**Summary:**

Eleven names her cats.

## The Naming of Cats

Thanks to Iron (.exe) for the D&D lesson, as well as some of the best jokes. Also a big thank you to Pennsylvania Jones, who suggested names for the kittens and kindly let me steal them.

“Miiiiike?”

The voice gets his attention immediately, not because it's calling his name but because of the tone. The voice is cooing. The voice is gentle. The voice is loving. The voice is also Dustin's voice, which is just bizarre. Kind of gag-inducing, to be honest. Mike closes his D&D manual in a hurry and gapes at his friend, eyebrows raised.

“Yeah?” His own voice is cautious.

“What?” Dustin tears his gaze away from the sofa to stare at Mike. They meet each other's eyes, equally confused.

“What what?” Mike asks, since Dustin is just watching him impatiently.

Dustin opens his mouth (probably to add an extra what to the question) and then thinks better of it. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“You're the one that called me,” Mike says, tilting his chair back slightly.

“I did not.” Dustin's voice is irritable.

“Oh.” Mike turns back to his manual, before something clicks. “Wait, what? You said my name.”

“Uh, no, I didn't.”

Dustin's giving him his patented why are you such an idiot look and it's annoying, especially since Dustin started all of this in the first place. He tries to control his irritation because they have an

audience. Will and Eleven are watching them both from the couch. Will seems amused, but he's used to their squabbling. Eleven looks a lot more somber. She still has a hard time differentiating irritation from anger. He reminds himself of that as he takes a deep breath and exhales slowly.

"You said my name."

"Jesus. I did not!"

"Yeah, you did." Now Mike's voice is irritable, too. He can't help it. Dustin started all of this, and it's so freaking stupid, anyway. Before Dustin can open his mouth, Mike snaps, "Dustin. Seriously. You just said my name. Like three seconds ago."

"No, I said 'Mike.'"

"Mike is my fucking name," Mike snarls.

Dustin throws his hands up in exasperation, as if Mike is being deliberately obtuse. "Not you-Mike. Cat-Mike." Dustin rolls his eyes, indicating that this distinction should be obvious. Mike gapes at him for a few seconds in silence, but at least the irritation is gone.

"Cat-Mike?"

"Jesus. Seriously? Yeah, cat-Mike. Little. Fluffy. Squashed face. Is any of that ringing a bell with you?"

Mike rolls his eyes, too. "Thank you for the reminder. I really couldn't remember the cat I got her for Christmas. Thanks."

"You're welcome." Dustin's voice is undeniably smug. Mike suddenly feels like strangling him, but he resists. Unsurprisingly, it requires a heroic amount of effort. He sets the D&D manual down on the table with enough force to rattle his glass. He glances back at his other friends, trying to gauge the expression on Eleven's face. There's nothing to worry about, though, because Eleven and Will are giggling. Dustin is giggling. Lucas would probably fucking giggle, too, but he's not at the Hopper household today. He's at the arcade with

Max. Hopper's due home for his lunch break soon. If they can talk him into it, the rest of them will head to the arcade as well.

"I hate to break it to you, but I definitely wouldn't use that tone of voice with you," Dustin tells his friend.

"Good to know."

"I'm sorry," Dustin adds sadly, as if he's disappointed Mike somehow.

"It was actually pretty disturbing."

Dustin pretends not to hear him but his eyes twinkle. "You're nowhere near as cute as cat-Mike, to be honest. Sorry," he adds serenely before glancing pointedly at Eleven. She doesn't appear to be ready with a retort because she and Will are still giggling, but what the hell. "And you don't need to try to bolster his ego, El. You know it's true. Cat-Mike has better hair, for one."

Mike gives him a sour look but doesn't say anything.

"It's almost as good as Steve's hair, actually."

The sour look becomes a scowl. "Jesus. Will you shut up about Steve's hair?"

"Steve's hair is awesome."

Mike opens his D&D manual again and ignores him. Eleven tries to withhold her laughter. Mike hates hearing about Steve's hair. She's not really sure why. She thinks it's because he's worried about his own, although she's told him that she likes his better. And she does. It's dark and fluffy. A lot fluffier than it was last year. Her hair is fluffier now, too, but his is prettier. Dustin follows her gaze and seems to understand. He shakes his head sadly at her before resuming his search for the kitten.

"Mike? Mike!"

Will and Eleven quickly glance at their friend but Mike is bent over his book in apparent absorption. Will can't help noticing that his fingers are tapping impatiently against his water glass, though. He

bites back a grin and resumes playing with the Lucas and Will kittens. The Dustin kitten is having a snooze on Dustin's jacket on the sofa arm.

"Shit. Where is she?" Dustin asks worriedly. "Mike didn't get out when Will got here, did she?" He glowers at Will and Will raises his hands defensively.

"I didn't let her out!"

"Did you come in with your feet blocking the door, like I showed you last time?"

"Yes," Will tells him impatiently. "I did." He doesn't add that Dustin is rapidly turning into his mother, although he is. Definitely. Maybe it's the lingering guilt over Mews. Will tries to be sympathetic but it's hard when Dustin's still regarding him suspiciously.

"Then where is she? I haven't seen her since I got here."

Mike-the human Mike-speaks up from the kitchen. He's still bent over his book but evidently he's been paying attention.

"Dustin, relax. El can find her. Right, El?"

Eleven nods. She can. It's not hard. She can find anyone, but cats are easy. She doesn't even have to concentrate very hard. It only takes a second before she touches the kitten's mind with her own. The kitten is in Hopper's room. Hopper won't like that. He must have forgotten to close his door when he left this morning. Eleven is about to break the connection when she senses something. Oh no. Hopper won't like that, either. Eleven wrinkles her forehead slightly and then returns her attention to the room. The guys are watching her curiously.

"I found her."

"Where is she? What's she doing?" Dustin asks, since El's forehead is still wrinkled and she looks a little worried. Or disgusted. Or both.

"Hairball." A big hairball, actually. Maybe because the kitten has so much hair? More hair than the other cats at the pet store, anyway.

“Oh. Gross.”

“In Hopper’s shoe.”

For a second they’re all torn between hilarity and anxiety. Hilarity wins, at least temporarily. Will’s laughter disturbs the kittens in his lap. The Will kitten gives him a reproachful look before leaping onto the coffee table to groom himself. He’s no doubt working on his own hairball. His brother follows his example. Dustin wipes his streaming eyes and attempts to regain control. “Hopper’s going to be pissed.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Which shoe?” Mike asks Eleven.

“The right one,” she clarifies, and he smiles.

“I meant, which pair? Like his work shoes? House shoes?”

“Oh. The new ones. For dressing up.”

“Shit.”

“Shit would have been even worse,” Dustin chortles and Mike snorts with laughter. Will attempts to control his amusement because someone has to take this seriously.

“Maybe we should clean it up,” Will says.

“Probably.”

None of them make any move to do so. Eleven glances at the clock before looking at Mike wordlessly. Mike understands the look and abandons his manual.

“Hopper’s going to be home in a few minutes,” Mike tells the guys. Dustin shifts his weight from one leg to the other but otherwise doesn’t move. Will nods in agreement.

“We should probably clean it up,” Will repeats, although Dustin can’t help but notice that Will’s actually settled back against the couch cushions instead of getting up and off his ass.

“Probably,” Dustin says again.

None of them make any move to do so.

“Hopper’s friends,” Dustin puts emphasis on the word, “with your mom.”

“So?” Will asks. “You’re the one that had a cat.”

“Exactly. I’ve already done my fair share.” Not to mention the last dreadful clean-up, which he’s not going to be forgetting any time soon. Unfortunately. Dustin shudders. “Besides, they’re El’s cats.”

That’s undeniably true. Eleven gives a little sigh but Will comes to her rescue. “El was just touching her mind when she threw up. I think that disqualifies her from clean-up this time.”

“The kittens were Mike’s idea,” Dustin exclaims triumphantly before turning to his friend. “And you did accept full responsibility for them. So...go do that. Accept responsibility.” Mike rolls his eyes and moves toward the hallway without another word. Eleven follows him.

Mike looks around Hopper’s room with interest. It’s messy but otherwise almost devoid of personality, except for the large collection of records. Eleven gently extracts the kitten from under the bed and holds her close. Mike raises his eyebrows at her and she points to the box near the dresser in response. Mike cautiously approaches and peers in. He winces. The shoes are evidently brand-new and haven’t been worn yet. Mike grabs the right shoe and hurries back down the hallway with it. Eleven quickly checks for the other kittens before closing the door behind her and following him into the kitchen.

“Jesus,” Will says, backing away from the shoe as if it could explode at any moment.

“It’s kind of impressive,” Dustin points out.

“Shut up, Dustin,” Mike snaps, grabbing a couple of paper towels.

“You’re never getting that out.”

“Shut up.”

"I'm serious. You should toss it in the trash."

"Dustin."

"You could cover it up with paper towels so he wouldn't see."

"Dustin. It was still in the box. I think he'd notice."

"Well, throw it in the washer."

"It's leather, Dustin. You can't just throw it in the washer."

"Oh."

"Can you go and watch the door? Keep him distracted," Mike directs the question at Will, evidently ignoring Dustin. Again.

"I'm on it," Will says, strolling back into the living room. Dustin leans against the counter and watches Mike with interest. He almost doesn't notice Eleven until the Mike kitten is thrust at him. He takes the kitten from her and Eleven joins Mike at the sink. She gently wets a paper towel and hands it to him.

"Thanks," he says, at the same time she says in a quiet voice, "thank you." They both smile at each other dopily and Dustin represses the human equivalent of a hairball. Only Mike and Eleven can be sappy while cleaning up after a cat. Instinctively, he turns to roll his eyes at Lucas before remembering that Lucas is at the arcade. He rolls his eyes at the kitten instead before joining Will's vigil at the window.

Mike barely notices his departure, because Eleven is standing so close she's touching his shoulder and it's a little distracting. It would probably be a lot more distracting if he weren't cleaning up something lumpy and disgusting. "I think that's the best it's going to get. Does that look okay?"

The shoe is wet inside but clean. Eleven nods and sets it on the floor to dry. Then she thinks better of it and gently places it on the counter instead. The kittens can't jump that high yet. Mike washes his hands, then washes them again. And a third time, just to be on the safe side. He's contemplating washing them a fourth time when Eleven speaks.



“What’s it like?”

Mike decides that three times is plenty. He shuts off the flow of water and grabs another paper towel before turning to her. She looks a little nervous. “What’s what like?”

“The arcade.”

“Oh. It’s, um. Remember the games they had at the skating rink?”

Eleven nods.

“It’s like that, just a lot more of them.”

Eleven’s still waiting so he elaborates. “There are a ton of different games and it’s kind of loud, like it was at the bowling alley. But you get used to it. It’s usually pretty crowded on the weekends...are you okay with that?” He doesn’t wait for her response. “Because if you’d rather not go, we can do something else. Or we can check it out and then leave if you don’t like it.”

“I want to go,” she says.

“Oh. Okay. Cool.”

“Cool,” she repeats, smiling, and Mike laughs.

“Guys, I don’t think Hopper’s coming,” Will calls from the living room. Eleven looks at her watch. It’s 1-1-4. Hopper’s late. He’s usually always home for lunch at 1 PM, but it’s a Saturday. Days of Our Lives isn’t on today.

“Maybe we could call him at work?” Mike asks her. She shrugs.

“He calls if he’s late.” Eventually.

“Lucas won’t mind if we’re late,” Will reassures her.

“I think Max’s mom is picking her up at three, though,” Dustin says. Mike and Will both give him pointed looks. “Oh. It’s okay, though. Maybe next weekend?” He forgot. Eleven was looking forward to hanging out with the whole party for once.

“Why don’t you guys go ahead and I’ll stay with El until Hopper gets here?”

Dustin rolls his eyes at Mike’s suggestion. “I’m sure Hopper would just love that,” he mutters under his breath. He wishes Lucas were here.

“What?”

“Never mind. I have a better idea.”

Ten minutes later, Dustin is happily sprawled on the couch and ostensibly watching cartoons. He’s actually mostly just snuggling the kittens, but it’s okay. No one else is around to give him shit for it. He’s on his second commercial break when the phone rings. He gently moves the kittens aside to stand up. One of them clings to his leg and he deposits him on the couch instead. “Sorry, little guy. I’ll be back,” he says, heading for the kitchen. He snags the phone off the wall.

“Hopper residence, Dustin speaking,” he says, using his most professional voice. There’s a long pause, but he expected that. He waits it out patiently.

“What...what are you doing answering my phone?” Hopper’s tone is immediately recognizable to Dustin. It’s not cantankerous yet, but it’s definitely somewhere on the spectrum.

“It’s nice, isn’t it? Like having a secretary.”

“I have a secretary.” He still sounds more bewildered than pissed off.

“Say hi to Flo for me.”

“I will-wait, what are you doing answering the phone?”

“Well, it wasn’t going to answer itself, now, was it?”

“Why are you in my house?”

“Why do you think?” Dustin asks him sensibly.

“Why are you answering my phone?”

Dustin can tell this conversation is going nowhere. He smothers a grin and decides to be a little more helpful. “Taking messages, and asking permission for her to go to the arcade.”

“Put her on.”

“Can’t.”

“What?”

“I just said, I am taking messages. And making sure it’s okay for her to go to the arcade.”

“Why are you taking messages? Where is she?”

Dustin hears the unmistakable sound of Hopper gritting his teeth. It’s kind of impressive to hear it over the phone. “Oh. She’s at the arcade.”

There’s another pause as Hopper digests this tidbit of information. Then he sighs. “Let me get this straight. So you stayed behind to ask my permission for her to go, when she’s already gone?”

“Yep.”

There’s another lengthy pause and Dustin can hear cartoons from the living room. The commercials are over. He cranes his neck to see the TV and decides to wrap this up. “So?” He prompts.

“So, what?”

“Can she go?”

“Are you aware of the irony of that question?”

“Yep.”

“Do I have any choice?”

“Nope. Besides, you were going to let her go anyway.”

"I was going to drive her. I don't want her riding her bike that far until she's more comfortable with it."

"Not to worry, she rode with Mike."

"Tell her to be home by 5. Wait. Are you going to the arcade?"

Dustin rolls his eyes. "No, I thought I'd stay here and see what you have for snacks. Maybe take a nap after, if that's too strenuous." Hopper surprises Dustin by laughing and he nearly drops the phone. He almost feels bad about the shoe now.

"Lock up when you go."

"Yep. We'll see ya at 5, Hop."

"Wait. You guys are coming back over?" Dustin hears Hopper's voice from far away but he's already placing the phone on the receiver. Too late now. Oh well.

The arcade is packed. Will heads off to find Lucas and Max while Mike and Eleven make a more leisurely entrance. Eleven looks around curiously. And a little nervously. There are a lot of people here. Even more people than at the skating rink or the bowling alley. There aren't as many kids as there were at the dance but it seems like more. Maybe it just seems like a lot of people because the room is crowded with stuff. There is barely room to move. As if to prove that point, a kid bumps into her and she has to steady herself. He apologizes over his shoulder and Eleven stares at his retreating back. Her palms are suddenly sweaty and damp. She's feeling a little claustrophobic. And agoraphobic. She isn't aware of those words but she understands exactly how they feel.

"You okay?" Eleven tries to focus her attention on Mike and takes a deep breath. Mike looks worried. "You want to go back outside? It's okay if you want to."

She shakes her head.

"Are you sure?"

She nods. She is sure. Almost. Mike sees the uncertainty on her face and takes her hand. She feels bad because her hand is so sweaty but Mike doesn't appear to notice. Or care. He leads her to a corner of the room that's empty of people. She sees the signs on the games. Out of order. It's a lot quieter over here. And Mike is here. And not mad. And he's still holding her sweaty hand. She starts to relax and he smiles at her reassuringly.

"Let's wait here for a little while, okay? Until you get used to it."

What about the others?

She's thinking it to herself because she feels bad. Her other friends (except for Dustin) are waiting for them, and Max has to leave soon. She's only thinking to herself, but she gets a response.

"Don't worry, they'll find us," Mike answers absently. Eleven looks at him with surprise. Apparently Mike isn't aware that she never opened her mouth. She smiles down at their hands until he lifts them both into a wave. She peers around him and sees Dustin just entering the arcade. He smirks at their upraised hands and Mike lowers them again, turning a little pink. He doesn't let go, though, and that makes Eleven happy.

"How did Hopper take it?"

"He's expecting us all for dinner at 5." Sort of. Dustin raises his eyebrows at them both and Mike glances at Eleven. Dustin is patient but Mike's face tells her he wouldn't mind waiting all day. If she wanted. If she needed. It relaxes her completely and she nods her assent. He holds tightly onto her hand just in case as they make their way through the room. It doesn't take them long to find the rest of their friends. Lucas and Will are watching Max play a game. Dustin shoves his way in between the guys to see her score.

"Shit."

Eleven looks at the screen. "Her number is bigger than yours. A lot bigger." She doesn't mean for the words to hurt his feelings, she's just stating the facts, and Dustin knows it. It's why he reserves his withering glare for the guys, who are snickering.

"Bet your ass it is," Max says. "Hi, Ele-El." Max catches herself just in time.

"Ele-el. That's a good one. I like it," Dustin teases, and Max rolls her eyes.

"Hi, Max."

"Want to take a turn?"

Eleven opens her mouth to answer but Dustin's already inserting his change. "You're going down, Max."

"Doubtful. When have you ever beaten me?"

"Shut up. I'm trying to concentrate."

Lucas and Max watch him, giggling. He plays three rounds before the others start getting bored. Will sighs. "This could take all day. Want to play Pac-Man?"

"I don't know how."

"It's okay, we'll show you. Here, watch me. Okay. So this is Pac-Man. You go around this little maze and eat all of these things for points, see? And those things are worth more points." Pac-Man runs into a monster and Will scowls.

"And you don't do that," Mike adds.

Will shrugs good-naturedly and moves aside, offering his place to Eleven.

Eleven is surprisingly good at Pac-Man, especially considering it's her first time. Will checks her face constantly for a nosebleed, although he's not sure how telekinetic powers would give an advantage to this particular game. Eleven's attention is laser-focused on the game and she barely notices Dustin joining them.

"How did it go?" Will asks him.

"Shut up."

“Okay then,” Will says agreeably before walking away to take his turn at Dig Dug. Dustin grumbles a bit but follows him. He can’t resist. Eleven turns back to the game, but it’s over. It needs more quarters.

“You want to play again? Or do you want to play something else now?”

“Something else,” Eleven says, and Mike leads her down the aisle of games, keeping up a running commentary as they walk. Their section of the room erupts into loud groans followed by giggling, and they both turn in that direction. Apparently Will isn’t very good at Dig Dug, either, judging from the laughter.

“At least you were better than Lucas,” Dustin tells Will, and Lucas glares at them both. Dustin ignores the glare. It’s easy. He’s had a lot of practice. He catches sight of his friends and brightens. “Mike! You’re up. Then you take a turn, El. Watch very carefully and then do the exact opposite of whatever he does.”

Mike rolls his eyes but doesn’t bother to retort. He’s digging in the pocket of his jeans for any surviving quarters. He’s managed to unearth a couple when he hears the unmistakable sound of someone chewing. Loudly. Obnoxiously. Mike sighs. He doesn’t have to look at his friends to know that they’re all sighing, too. The arcade only has one drawback (besides the drain on his allowance, that is) and that drawback is standing right next to them and eating Cheetos.

“Hi, guys.”

“Hi, Keith,” they mumble unenthusiastically.

“How’s your sister?”

Mike gives him a disgusted look, but Keith’s attention is fixed elsewhere. He’s staring at Eleven unblinkingly. One hand coated in Cheeto dust rummages in the bag. “You’re new,” he comments, extracting a Cheeto and pointing it at Eleven.

Eleven looks sideways at Mike. She’s not sure why, but Mike is tense

and irritated. Cranky. It briefly crosses her mind that Keith might be a bully like Troy and James, but none of her friends seem scared, just annoyed. Keith is still gazing at her. A mouth breather, she decides, but not a bully. She doesn't respond, because he didn't actually ask her a question. She merely stares back at him, just as unblinkingly. Dustin averts his eyes to avoid snickering.

Max finally breaks the silence, because the staring is creeping her out. And because no one else is going to, apparently. "She just moved here."

Keith lovingly chooses another Cheeto and crunches it thoughtfully. "Oh, yeah? I'm Keith."

"I know," Eleven says, because she does. They've already said his name.

"Heard a lot about me, huh?"

"No," Eleven says honestly. Dustin and Lucas avoid eye contact until Lucas can't take it anymore and he turns his laughter into a coughing fit.

"Oh. Well, welcome to Hawkins."

"Thank you."

"Sorry, I didn't get your name."

Eleven doesn't respond because that doesn't sound like question to her, either. It sounds more like an apology, because he said sorry. She's not sure why he's sorry about anything so she doesn't know what to say.

"Her name's El. Eleanor," Mike supplies after a beat of silence that's both painful and hilarious. He doesn't introduce her as Jane because El isn't really a plausible nickname for Jane. And because they never call her that, anyway.

"You don't talk much, do you? Where are you from?"

"Sweden," Lucas pipes up. He's recovered from his fit of laughter.



"She's Mike's cousin," Will answers robotically, because they all know the cover story by rote. He's already regretting the words before they've even left his mouth. Mike gives him an are you fucking kidding me look and Lucas has another coughing fit. "I mean, she's my cousin," he hastily amends, blushing a little.

Before Keith can open his mouth to respond, Max breaks the awkward moment by theatrically looking at her watch. "Shit. My mom's probably already outside. I've gotta go. You guys gonna walk me out?"

"Yes! Absolutely. We will absolutely walk you out," Dustin says, gratefully seizing on any excuse to exit the conversation. "See ya, Keith." They make a mass exodus toward the door, at least until they're out of Keith's eyesight. "Bye, Max," Dustin says.

Max stares at him, forehead creased. "Huh?"

"You said your mom's outside."

"Oh. No. I've still got half an hour." She already has a handful of change ready. Dustin gives her an approving look before wandering off to get snacks. He's careful to keep an eye out for Keith. When he returns, his friends are engrossed.

"Here." Dustin hands Eleven a giant pretzel. She takes it with an enthusiasm that's usually only reserved for Eggos.

"Thank you."

"Anytime."

Lucas reaches out to snag some Reese's but Dustin smacks his hand away. Lucas stares at him, bewildered.

"Don't even think about it. I know you got your allowance this morning."

Lucas gives an irritated huff and Will laughs. Dustin hands him the Reese's. "For the quick save. And congrats on the new addition to the Byers family. Max, you get this, because I had no idea what you would want," Dustin hands her a box of Whoppers. "Good job on

getting us the hell away from Keith.”

Mike’s looking at him expectantly.

“I didn’t get you anything, either. You got paid yesterday. But I did notice that the coast is clear and Dig Dug is free. Enjoy.” Dustin delivers this in a magnanimous tone, as if it’s a treat he’s devised especially for Mike.

The party goes their separate ways. Lucas and Max are sharing Whoppers and playing Donkey Kong. Dustin is observing and critiquing their efforts. Mike, Eleven, and Will head back to Dig Dug but Will gets diverted along the way when a girl calls his name. Eleven recognizes her from the Snow Ball. The girl who danced with Will. Will looks terrified and elated at the same time. He hesitates before following her and Mike nods encouragingly. Mike digs for his quarters again but Eleven stops him.

“Here,” she says, handing him half of her pretzel.

“That’s okay, I’ll get something later. Thanks, though.”

Eleven meets his eyes, verifying that he doesn’t actually want it. He understands the look and nods. She smiles and he grins at her before returning inserting his quarters. He tries to explain the game as he plays it but it soon captures his attention and he falls silent. It’s interesting to watch at first but it goes on for a long time and she gets a little bored. And she’s already finished her pretzel, so there isn’t anything else to occupy her attention. She takes one last glance at Mike. His hair is hanging in his eyes and his brow is furrowed in concentration. She smiles a little and goes to find her other friends.

They aren’t where she left them, but it’s okay. She doesn’t panic, because she finds them easily. They haven’t gone far. The girl from the Snow Ball is with them. They’re grouped around a machine that’s full of stuffed animals of different sizes and breeds. A metal contraption hangs over them and it looks a little scary but they’re all having fun. She approaches them curiously. Lucas is controlling the metal arm. It hovers over one of the animals but misses. Lucas curses and everyone laughs.

"This goddamned thing is rigged," he says angrily.

"Relax. That was only your sixth try. Everyone knows you have to shovel in at least three bucks before you get anything," Dustin advises. Lucas looks disgusted but inserts another quarter, telling himself that it's the absolute last time. He's been telling himself that with each of the previous four attempts. He manipulates the claw to the right and hovers over a big bear.

"No! You have to go for the tiny ones."

Lucas sighs and moves the claw forward, over a small and fuzzy pink animal of an indeterminable breed.

"A little more. No, to the right," Will says, peering at the animals from the side of the game. "Okay, there. No, back."

"Forward again," Dustin says helpfully.

"Back," Will commands.

"Shut up, both of you," Lucas grumbles and presses the button. The claw extends and grasps nothing but air. Again. "Shit."

"Maybe another try?"

"Shut up."

Lucas looks at his remaining quarters. Back at the machine. And again at the quarters. He's about to glance at the game again when Max elbows him out of the way and he looks at her in surprise instead. She plucks one of the quarters out of his hand and shoves it in. She immediately moves the claw toward the big bear and Dustin groans. Max pauses and makes a minute adjustment before slapping her palm on the button. The claw descends and snags the bear.

"Holy shit," Dustin breathes, watching the bear's progress.

"You're going to lose it," Will says as the bear slips a quarter of an inch.

"No, I'm not."

And she doesn't. The bear drops into the tray and she grabs it with a smirk as they cheer. She hands the bear to Lucas and pecks him on the cheek. Dustin snickers and Lucas whacks him with the bear. "I've gotta go, see you guys later." Max catches sight of Eleven standing a little behind them. The others haven't noticed her yet. "Bye, El." Will smiles at Eleven and she steps closer to the group.

"Bye, Max."

"Here," Lucas says, trying to hand the bear back to Max.

"Nah. You seemed to really want it," she teases, before lifting her hand in a wave. Dustin watches her leave.

"That's a big-ass bear, Lucas."

"Don't say a word."

"You can tell yourself that you won it, though, if it makes you feel better. It was your quarter."

"Shut up."

Dustin grins at Eleven and she giggles. He moves forward to make his own attempt at the game. Lucas ignores him and turns to Eleven. "Where's Mike?"

"Still playing."

"Oh. Oh! Hey, you haven't met Amy. Amy, this is El."

Lucas gives Will a pointed look and he obediently parrots, "She's my cousin."

"Hi. I saw you at the dance," Amy says, but whatever else she was going to say is drowned out by Dustin's jubilant cries.

"You've got to be kidding me," Lucas groans. Dustin beams at him happily and Lucas shakes his head in dismay.

"Only took me four tries," Dustin boasts, holding up his prize for them to admire.

“What is it?”

“Well. That’s a good question. It’s fuzzy. And pink.”

“I can see that.”

“It’s definitely a stuffed animal,” Dustin says. “Which I won.”

“That’s using the word “animal” pretty loosely,” Lucas mutters. “I don’t think it’s an animal.”

“Maybe. That’s a possibility. But what’s a certainty is that I won it.”

“Maybe it’s a dog?” Amy asks.

Dustin looks at it critically. It looks like someone crossed a dog with a giraffe. He doesn’t know what the hell it is, but he’s guessing it somehow escaped quality control at the warehouse. It doesn’t matter, though. He tosses it at Lucas, who catches it reflexively. “For you,” Dustin says sweetly. When Lucas moves to throw it back at him (and probably with as much force as possible, which isn’t much, considering it fits in the palm of his hand), he adds “you can give it to Max and pretend you won it for her.”

Lucas gives him a sour look, but he does hold onto the fuzzy dogaffe.

Mike’s used up the last of the quarters earmarked for him and he knows there’s no way in hell he’s going to be breaking anyone’s score. He tells himself he’s just being pessimistic, and tries to think positively. He fails, both at thinking positive and also at managing a decent score.

“Damn it. Okay, your turn,” he says, turning toward Eleven. Eleven isn’t there. He glances to his left so quickly that his hair flops into his eyes. She’s not there, either. He tells himself it’s stupid but he can’t help the sick feeling in his chest. She’s fine, she just got bored, one voice says. The other voice is panicking completely because she’s disappeared before. And he already feels guilty, because he was too wrapped up in a goddamned game. And if something happened...

That’s stupid. Just go look for her.

And he will. He tries. But he seems to be frozen in place, looking around for some sign of her.

Eleven?

There's no response, but he tells himself it's not really surprising. It usually doesn't work, not unless they're thinking at each other. Or whatever the rules are. He still hasn't quite figured it out yet. Still, the lack of response breaks his paralysis and he pushes his way through a couple of people without even a backwards look until one of them grabs his arm.

"Hey!" He tries to wrench his arm free and then realizes it's Dustin. Lucas is with him.

"What's wrong with you?" Lucas asks, because his friend looks distinctly agitated.

Dustin takes him in at a glance. "She's fine. She's up there, with Will and Amy," he says, letting go of Mike and pointing. Mike relaxes.

"Thanks."

"She's not going anywhere, Mike," Dustin says, and his voice is unusually gentle. Mike glances away from his friend. He already knows that. Logically, anyway, but that doesn't always help.

"You didn't notice she was gone?" Lucas laughs, completely oblivious. Mike's face falls again. Dustin glares at Lucas and he realizes his gaffe. "Oh. Uh. It's not a big deal, Mike. She's been with us the whole time."

Mike is still avoiding eye contact, which is how he notices that Lucas is clutching a couple of stuffed animals to his chest. Lucas follows his gaze. "Oh. Max won a bear," he mutters.

"And I won that," Dustin points to the fuzzy thing happily.

"You don't even know what that is, Dustin."

"That's true. But I do know that I won it."

It's their usual bantering. Dustin teases his friend automatically, but his heart isn't really in it. Especially when Mike abruptly walks away without another word to either of them. Dustin and Lucas watch him go before looking at each other.

"Jesus," Lucas says. "How long is this going to go on?"

"He's getting better, he just needs time," Dustin answers, hoping it's the truth.

Mike's still in earshot. Dustin's right. He just needs more time. And he has a lot of time. They have a lot of time. All of the time they want, in fact. He just needs to keep reminding himself of that fact until it gets easier. And until then, he doesn't mind looking like an idiot occasionally.

He finds Eleven quickly. She's with Amy, but hanging back a little. They're both watching Will. Will's attempting to maneuver the claw over a lion. Judging from the look on his face and the blush, he's already thrown at least a couple of bucks away. The claw descends and even from a distance Mike can tell there's no way in hell that he's going to succeed this time, either. The claw gives a sudden lurch to the right and clamps tightly onto the lion. Amy cheers. Will, looking mystified, gives her the lion. She grins at him and his bemusement becomes delight. Eleven turns around and discreetly wipes her nose. Mike stifles a laugh. She catches sight of him and gives him a little smile.

They're back at the Hopper household well before 5, because they're completely broke. They get there a few minutes before Hopper does. "I should have won something for Hop," Dustin mumbles sadly as they watch his car pull into the driveway.

"I'm pretty sure he would have shot you."

"He's the chief. It's not like he's going to go around murdering people."

"I think he'd make an exception," Lucas mutters under his breath as

Hopper opens the door. He doesn't look too perturbed to see them all, which is progress. And even better, he's carrying a couple of pizzas.

"How was the arcade?"

"Good," Eleven replies.

"Maybe next time you could stick around to actually ask permission?"

"You were late."

Hopper sighs and sets the pizzas down. Dustin grabs the plates and Will rummages through the fridge, checking out the beverage options. Mike and Eleven get glasses. Lucas clears the table of D&D books and notes. Hopper watches the casual coordination, wondering how in the hell they've all made themselves so much at home. In his home. Maybe it's like with animals. Once you feed them, they just keep coming back.

Eleven hands him a glass.

It's really not so bad. Kind of nice, in a way. He's getting used to it. Or at least he's not as prone to spontaneous eye twitching anymore. Hopper opens the pizza box but his attention's diverted almost immediately. His new shoe is sitting on the counter. And he knows very well it was in a box in his room.

"Why is my shoe in the kitchen?"

No one answers and he sighs. He picks up the shoe and peers at it, as if it's going to answer his question. The inside is damp.

"Why is my shoe wet?"

When that doesn't garner a response, either, he glances around the room. Lucas is clearly puzzled but everyone else is avoiding eye contact. He sighs again and drops it back onto the counter. He really doesn't want to know.

The kids spread out to eat their dinner, because his table isn't big enough to accommodate all of them at once. The first time they had



dinner at the Hopper household, Dustin suggested that Hopper just buy a bigger table. Hopper offered a counter-suggestion and told them to stay at home.

This time, Lucas and Dustin opt to eat in the living room, mostly because Dustin knows for a fact that the kittens love Parmesan cheese and he can't resist the opportunity to sneak them just a taste. Mike and Eleven eat at the table with Hopper. Will hovers indecisively before taking pity on Mike and joining them. He pulls the chair back from the table and sees the Mike kitten sitting in a little kitten loaf. He gently scoops her up and places her on the floor.

"Mike!" Dustin screeches from the living room.

Mike's chewing a slice of pepperoni and doesn't even glance up. Hopper looks at him curiously. Mike seems to feel his gaze and meets his eyes before shrugging and taking another bite of pizza.

"MIKE!"

Mike reaches for his napkin and wipes the pizza grease off his fingers. Dustin strides into the kitchen and stands behind him, looking irritable.

"Mike!"

When that doesn't get a response, he thumps him on the shoulder. Mike turns around angrily.

"What?"

"Did you not hear me, like, shouting your name?"

"Yes. Yes, I did."

"Then why the hell didn't you say anything?"

"I thought you were talking to the cat again."

Dustin huffs and the kids giggle. Hopper's watching them in amusement. He's actually enjoying himself. It's a little scary, to be honest.

“What did you need?”

“A napkin.”

Dustin and Mike stare at each other before Mike breaks the silence.

“Seriously? There are other people in the kitchen. Why didn’t you ask Will?”

“You’re closer,” Dustin replies absently, grabbing a couple of napkins. He’s deep in thought. “Maybe we should start calling you Michael.”

“Are you serious?”

“Okay, okay. What about Mike Wheeler?”

Mike rolls his eyes and Eleven giggles. “Maybe it’s time to give them names,” she says.

“Yeah?” Mike asks her. “Got any picked out?”

Eleven shrugs and looks down at the table. She’s not very good with names, which is a little funny, because she has so many herself. She doesn’t really know what makes a good name. She likes Mike’s name, and Dustin’s, and Will’s, and Lucas’s, and the names of everyone on her list. But she can’t name her kittens after any of those people, because that’s the whole problem in the first place. She doesn’t even know very many names, which makes it harder to pick one. She doesn’t want to name them after characters on *Days of Our Lives*, or any other TV show. She wants them to have good names, but she also wants them to have special names. Maybe she could name them after the hobbits? She likes the hobbits a lot. And there are four hobbits, so it would be perfect. Eleven brightens for a moment before remembering that her favorite hobbit is actually Bilbo, which makes five hobbits. And she only has four kittens. Maybe she could get another kitten? Eleven sneaks a glance at Hopper and immediately decides against asking. He already thinks that four is too many. Eleven gives a tiny sigh and picks a pepperoni off of her pizza.

Mike sees her dejected face staring down at her plate and understands immediately. “Don’t worry, we’ll figure it out,” he tells her. He glances at Will, who chimes in on cue.

“Yeah, there are a ton of good names. Like...Cindy.”

Dustin looks at him askance. “That’s kind of a boring name for a cat.”

“Fluffy,” Will amends, shrugging one shoulder.

“Too cliché.”

“Plus, they’re all fluffy. You can’t name them all Fluffy.”

Will seems to take that as a challenge. “Fluffy. Fuzzy. Hairy. Furball.” He grins triumphantly at them all and Hopper startles them by chuckling.

The sound carries into the living room, where Lucas is. “What are you all doing in there? Why is Hopper laughing?”

“You missed it, buddy. Better luck next time,” Dustin calls. Lucas appears seconds later, holding his empty plate. He takes in the scene at a glance. Will’s already finished and pushed his plate aside. Hopper’s still working on a slice. Eleven seems to be only eating the pepperonis, including the ones on Mike’s plate. Mike doesn’t seem to mind. Dustin’s leaning against the counter, eating straight out of the box since he’s left his plate in the living room.

Lucas squeezes past Mike’s chair and joins Dustin at the counter. Dustin takes pity on him because Lucas looks a little wounded at being left out. “We’re just suggesting names for the cats. You didn’t miss anything like, groundbreaking or anything. Jesus.”

“Oh.” He gives the matter some thought. “Fluffy.”

Dustin sighs in disgust. “Already suggested, already rejected.”

“Trouble,” Hopper says, and they all turn to him in surprise. “Menace. Nuisance. Pest.” He leans back in his chair and smirks at them. They would be annoyed except that Hopper’s cradling the Lucas kitten and appears to be enjoying his company.

Dustin squints his eyes and thought and rattles off the first male names that come to mind. “Adam. Mitch. Mark. Shawn. Steve.”

Mike's face stretches into a pained grimace. It kind of looks like he's choking on something, except he hasn't eaten anything in a couple of minutes. Eleven smothers a smile at his expression. For some reason, he really doesn't like talking about Steve. Or his hair.

"Jesus. Shut up about Steve," Lucas moans. Dustin ignores him.

"A lot of people name their pets after someone or something pretty," Will offers. "Like...um, Leia. Or Sparkles. Or something like that."

"Who the hell names a cat Sparkles?" Lucas mutters and Dustin shrugs.

Will pretends not to hear him and looks at Eleven. "What's the prettiest thing you can think of, El?" Lucas and Dustin make eye contact and smirk because they're pretty sure they know exactly how she'll respond. Mike doesn't seem to share that forethought, because he's reaching for his glass of soda and looks completely at ease. El watches him drink from his glass and considers the question carefully. He's in mid-sip. She smiles a little mischievously.

"Steve's hair," she answers, quietly but clearly.

Mike chokes and spews an amazing amount of coke across the table. It's like a caffeine fountain, and it's pretty impressive. Will dodges but he's a second too late.

"And the Olympic judges give him...ALL TENS!" Dustin cries, in his best announcer voice. Lucas breaks into a fit of laughter and even Hopper cracks a smile. Mike blushes. Will looks down at his shirt in disgust and Hopper hands him a couple of napkins. He dabs at the stains hesitantly. He doesn't really know where to begin. He's covered in it. Even his hair is wet. He has no idea how that much soda was in Mike's mouth at one time.

"Sorry," he mutters to Will. Will waves the apology away. Literally. With his napkin.

"Seriously, Mike. That was pretty awesome. It was just like being at Sea World."

Mike darts a glance at Eleven. She's covering her mouth to hide her

smile but it's obvious. Her eyes are dark and he can see the laughter in them. The playful look. Looking at her alleviates most of his embarrassment, because it's nice to see her feel comfortable enough with them to joke like that.

Hopper observes their extended eye contact and rolls his eyes. He takes that as his cue to watch some TV. Hopefully alone, he thinks, but it's too late. Dustin's following him into the living room like a living, chattering shadow, and the rest of them follow him. Hopper turns up the volume and tries to tune them all out. Dustin settles in next to him on the couch.

"Whatcha watching?"

"Miami Vice."

"What else is on?"

Hopper turns up the volume in response, and again any time someone speaks. Which is often, because they're still trying to name the damned cats. Pretty soon they're almost shouting over the TV and the volume won't go up anymore.

Dustin is methodical. He grabs a sheet of notebook paper from Mike's binder and sits, carefully attentive like a student, using the coffee table as a writing surface.

"What are you doing?"

Lucas leans over to read the paper. Dustin kitten: curious. Clean. Sleepy. He gives Dustin an incredulous look.

"Sleepy? What the hell is that?"

"I'm studying their individual attributes," Dustin answers, as if it should be obvious.

"Are you fu...freaking kidding me?" Lucas asks, glancing at Hopper. It's okay, though, because Hopper's ignoring them.

"What? Names happen to be very important, Lucas."

“Sleepy?” Lucas starts giggling and they all catch it from him, except for Dustin, who hits him with the pencil. Dustin keeps the game going long after the others have given up, but it’s pretty pointless because they shoot down every name he suggests. And give long-winded explanations as to why those particular names are horrible. Even Dustin loses his patience completely after half an hour. He throws the pencil onto the floor and the kittens fight over it.

“FINE. Twenty-one, Thirty-one, Forty-one, and Hank,” Dustin snaps irritably, pointing at each kitten in turn.

“Twenty-one, Thirty-one, Forty-one?” Will asks dubiously.

“Yes. Why not? Eleven is Eleven, and that’s an awesome name. So why the hell not?”

“Hank?” Lucas asks in disgust.

“Yes. Hank.”

“Uh, that’s the girl, dumb-ass.”

“So? I’m sure Hank could be a nickname for a girl’s name.”

They digest this in silence for a few seconds.

“Um. Like what? Name one.”

“I’ll think about it,” Dustin says breezily, focusing his attention on Miami Vice. Hopper judges it’s safe to lower the volume slightly. El’s watching him with an amused smile and he can’t help returning it because she looks so content. So normal. And it’s not so bad, having them all over. Although he’d prefer if they came over a little less often. Like once a month instead of whenever the hell they seem to feel like it. They usually don’t come over on Sundays, at least, because of their homework. That happy thought allows Hopper to relax completely, because today is Saturday. He’s even able to return Dustin’s grin when Dustin grabs the remote from him as soon as the credits roll.

Mike's grocery shopping with the guys on Sunday. They hate grocery shopping and especially hate the bike ride home with plastic bags dangling from their handlebars, but they've started volunteering their services every weekend, because the perks are awesome. Whatever change is left over becomes theirs, which helps fund their frequent trips to the arcade. It also means that they tend to buy the most off-brand of the off-brands in order to save an extra couple of bucks. That worked out pretty well. At least until Mike's mom put her foot down after Mike was sent to buy ingredients for lasagna and came home with a battered box of something labeled "Noddle product." Mike figures she's okay with the generic brands, as long as they at least spell everything correctly. Proper spelling probably indicates a higher quality of food.

"Anyone need fruits or vegetables?" Dustin asks. It's the first section near the door so they always hit it up first if they have to.

Lucas extracts his list from the pocket of his jeans. "Let's see...grapes, tomatoes, four green bell peppers."

"Eggplant," Mike says, and makes a face.

They wheel their carts in that general direction; as usual hoping they don't run into anyone they actually know. It may provide them with some easy cash, but it's also pretty freaking lame. Lucas examines the bell peppers until Dustin nudges him. "Look. Funny shapes. They're marked-down," he says, pointing to a sad little display of multicolored bell peppers. Lucas abandons the normal bell peppers immediately and the two rummage happily while Mike and Will gather their own supplies.

"What do you think?" Lucas asks, holding up a pepper. Dustin looks at it critically.

"It looks like an octopus."

Lucas turns it slightly, eyeing it. It does, actually. It seems to have arms. A lot of arms. Lucas isn't even sure it's actually a bell pepper, but it's green, so that's pretty close. Lucas waits for the verdict.

"Yep. I think it's okay," Dustin decides, and Lucas tosses it into his

cart. He's careful to buy two normal (and more expensive) bell peppers to make up for a couple of deformed ones.

They've got it down to a science by now. If they only bought the rejects or generic brands, their moms would resume the shopping. And they'd lose their profit margin. Lucas has made sixty cents so far, which is pretty good right off the bat.

They make their way to the dairy section, consulting their lists. Mike needs cheese slices. He checks for the absolute cheapest option and snags it. He regards the label dubiously. Imitation pasteurized process cheese food singelets, according to the label. He holds it out for inspection. Will reads the label and giggles.

"No," Lucas says immediately.

"Singelets?" Will asks, still laughing.

"I think that's worse than the noddle product," Dustin adds. Mike hesitates for a second before sadly exchanging it for an actual brand, and therefore losing a dollar in profit. They slowly make their way through the store. It takes a lot longer than regular shopping but it pays off. Literally. They calculate their profits while they wait in line.

"Let's see...I saved \$4.50, which will leave me around \$8.30. Not bad," Lucas says. He looks at Will.

"\$11 something," he says. His mom doesn't mind the off-brands so much, and she'll be glad of the change. He always gives her whatever's actually left, and she'll return whatever she can spare. If she can spare anything. He doesn't mind either way, although it's nice when it happens.

"\$6.25, I think," Dustin says. He's never the big winner because he has to buy cat food, and the brand-name cat food is already pretty low-quality so he never buys a generic brand.

"\$2 ish, plus whatever's left over from the \$30," Mike says dejectedly. He stuck to mostly brand names this time, just in case. Dustin pats his arm sympathetically and they wheel their carts forward a couple of inches. Someone is using at least a dozen coupons, and it's taking forever. Dustin eyes the coupons thoughtfully



and glances at Lucas. Lucas nods happily. Dustin makes a mental note to start clipping coupons.

Will flips through a National Enquirer out of sheer boredom as they wait.

“Anything good?”

Will snorts. “Nothing as interesting as what we’ve been through.”

“Good point.”

Will returns the copy to the stand and Mike glances at the other selections. There are several magazines of an even lower quality than the National Enquirer, and a couple of soap digests. Dustin considers buying one for Hopper but doesn’t want to dip into his profits just to tease him. Mike inches forward another foot and stares vacantly at the parenting books and magazines until one catches his eye. The book has a horrible cover of badly-drawn storks delivering equally terrible looking babies (one of them resembles Dart, actually), and the title is also nauseating. The Best Baby Name Book (in the whole wide world). The book looks awful, but it has potential, for obvious reasons. Eleven doesn’t feel qualified to name the cats because she’s not familiar with many names. And this is a giant fucking book of names. Mike happily grabs a copy and leafs through it briefly before throwing it into the cart.

“Uh...what the hell is that for?”

Mike looks at Lucas in exasperation. “For the cats. Obviously.”

Dustin peers at the cover. “Shit. Will could have drawn a better cover than that. In about two minutes.” Will tactfully doesn’t say anything, although it’s true. “Besides, they already have names,” Dustin adds.

“No, they don’t.”

“Yes, they do. I just named them, last night.”

“You don’t even remember what you named them, do you?”

“Sure I do. Hank. And some numbers.”

“Those names suck.”

Dustin doesn't disagree. They kind of do. But he also spent most of a Saturday trying to decide on names for some kittens. He loves the kittens, but that's a little closer to mom-territory than he'd like to be. He'd even be fine with naming them all Fluffy at this point. “Mike... you're really going to waste your money on a freaking baby name book?”

“Yep.”

Will doesn't even try to dissuade him because he can tell Mike is resolute. And Eleven will probably like it. He shrugs when Lucas and Dustin stare at him beseechingly.

Mike doesn't bat an eye as the cashier rings up his purchases although the guys are standing as far away from him as possible, without actually losing their own places in line. The cashier bags the book with the rest of the groceries and smiles at him.

“Tell your mom I said congratulations,” she chirps happily, and Mike just looks at her in bewilderment before he gets it. Oops. He opens his mouth to explain and frantically sorts through the possibilities. “It's for my friend.” That one is horrible. “For my sort-of girlfriend.” Even worse, considering what that might signify to a cashier he barely knows. And “for my sort-of girlfriend's cats” is just pathetic, even if it's the truth. Also, he's never actually said that word in relation to Eleven, and he's not about to start with the cashier at the Big Buy. He forks over his bills, still thinking, until he realizes she's already chatting with Lucas. She hands Mike his bags and the opportunity passes. He manages a pained grimace that almost passes for a smile and takes the bags without comment.

“Your mom's going to be pissed,” Lucas hisses under his breath, elbowing Mike out of the way. Lucas has a point, Mike thinks. But maybe she won't even find out, assuming he can keep her away from the grocery store for awhile. Nine months or so should do it. It never occurs to him to just explain the purpose of the baby name book to her, because that would mean admitting to pocking the savings every week.

Mike pedals home with the guys, two grocery bags swaying from each handlebar. Luckily, the plastic bags don't split this time. It took them forever to pick up all of the oranges last time. He waves goodbye to Dustin and Will as they turn right and continues on with Lucas. "When are you going to have the next campaign ready?" Lucas asks him, riding his bike a little closer.

"Next week, I think."

"I hope it's longer than the last one," Lucas grumbles.

Mike shoots him an injured look as they weave around a parked car. He's careful to keep his distance so their bags don't bounce off of each other. "The last one was 8 hours!"

"Yeah, but we had to break it down over a couple of weeks. That sucked."

Mike sighs. "Next Saturday, okay? The whole freaking day. Happy?"

"Yep. You want to come over later?"

"Can't, I need to finish my math homework."

"I finished mine in class," Lucas says smugly.

"Good for you."

Still smirking, Lucas pulls into his driveway. Mike rolls his eyes and rides his bike through the grass into his backyard before he remembers the groceries. He curses and rides back around the house, parking the bike next to Nancy's car. He shoves the book of baby names into his backpack and treks inside with the groceries. He crams them all into their appropriate spaces in the cabinets and fridge (mostly, anyway) before bounding up the stairs two at a time.

As soon as he's finished with the math problems, he opens up the baby name book and skims a couple of entries. He vaguely remembers his mom buying one of these before Holly was born. Out of curiosity, he flips to the H's. Holly: From the English word for the holly tree, ultimately derived from Old English *holen*. It's not that surprising, in retrospect, but it still doesn't make any sense. Holly

wasn't even a Christmas baby. He shrugs and advances to the M's. From the Hebrew name Mikha'el.

And that's all it has to say about his own name. Very illuminating. Mike snorts and checks the price on the back of the book before giving the book one last try. Nancy: Previously a medieval diminutive of ANNIS, though since the 18th century it has been a diminutive of ANNE. Now usually regarded as an independent name. He grumbles and flips to Anne, before learning that Nancy basically means "gracious." He snorts again and tosses the book aside. What a load of crap. Maybe Eleven will enjoy it, anyway. Although it's too bad she won't find her own name in there. The name she grew up with.

Against his better judgment, he grabs the book again and rifles through the pages to the J's. Jane: A feminine form of John. Irritably, he searches for John, half-expecting that the entry for John will lead him to a completely different name which will lead to another name like a freaking Möbius strip and eventually he'll forget what he was looking for in the first place. He runs his finger down the list of names and he's just located John when Nancy enters. She knocks perfunctorily but she's already actually opened the door and stepped inside. He doesn't even look up because the entry for John is ridiculous, too. Jesus.

"Mom wants to know if you want the eggplant lasagna tonight or tomorrow."

"I want it never," Mike says, glancing up at her. Nancy laughs.

"So, tomorrow, then?"

Mike stretches out on his bed. "That depends. What's the other option?"

"Meatloaf."

"Crappy lasagna tomorrow."

"Good call," Nancy says, turning toward the door. She falters in the doorway and stares at him. He stares back. Her mouth is open and her eyes are bulging a little. He sits up fast, alarmed.

“What?”

She doesn't say anything, just regards him in horror.

“What? What's wrong?”

Nancy's paralysis breaks and she shuts the door quickly. “You tell me, Mike.” She sits next to him on the bed and regards him somberly.

“Huh?”

“Is there something you need to talk about?”

Mike scratches his ear, puzzled. “Um...no?”

Nancy waits, letting the silence spin out. Mike raises his eyebrows. “Is there something you need to talk about?” He asks finally, because he has no idea what the hell is going on. Nancy looks like she's about to cry. She inclines her head slightly and drops her eyes pointedly and Mike follows her gaze. The book. He holds it up so she can see it.

“Oh. It's a book of baby names,” he says, which should be obvious, since it's written on the front cover in freaking huge letters.

Nancy bites her lip and clears her throat. “Why...why do you have a book of baby names?”

Oh. It is kind of weird reading for anyone that isn't currently pregnant, he supposes. “I got it at the store. For Eleven.”

Nancy draws in a sharp little breath and the penny finally drops. He turns red and heaves the book at her as if it's grown hot. She bats it away easily. They stare at each other, equally horrified, for a few seconds before Mike is able to croak, “For the cats! She doesn't know what to name the cats!”

“Ohh,” Nancy sighs in relief. Her heart rate starts returning to its normal rhythm. Mike's glaring daggers at her and she tries to apologize before breaking into a fit of giggles instead.

“Shut up,” he snaps, still red.

“Well, what did you expect? You’re reading...” but she can’t finish the sentence.

“Get out.”

“Maybe...maybe it’s time to have the talk...” Nancy wheezes in between giggles.

“Get out!”

“See, Mike. When two people are in love...” she hiccups and giggles again. Mike hastily stands up and stalks toward the door. If she won’t get out, he will. He slams the door hard enough to knock something over in his room and the sound of her laughter follows him all the way down the stairs. He makes a mental note to chuck the book in the trash later, then reconsiders. He imagines his dad finding it when he takes the trash out and nearly gags. Maybe he should just burn the fucking thing instead.

But he doesn’t, of course. He bikes over to Eleven’s after school the next day to drop it off. She might like it. And he spent over a buck on it. That’s a couple of rounds of Dig Dug, so he’s not going to waste it completely. He’s careful to deliver it when Hopper’s home so there aren’t any more misunderstandings.

“FOR THE CATS,” he bellows, tossing the book onto the coffee table as soon as he walks in. He hasn’t even said hello yet. Eleven’s eyebrows draw together in surprise and she glances at Hopper because Mike looks funny. His face is red and he’s a little twitchy. Hopper just looks amused, so there’s no help there. And Mike doesn’t stay long, either. He mumbles something about homework and promises to call her later before fleeing. Eleven stares at Hopper as the door closes with a rattle and he tries not to laugh. She picks up the book with interest and settles onto the couch next to him.

The book has a lot of names. Too many names to only pick four. She carefully pages to the M’s first and makes a face at Mike’s name, because it doesn’t really say anything. It’s disappointing because he has a nice name. She looks up Will’s name, and Dustin’s, and all of the rest of the people on her list. “Hopper isn’t in here,” she says.

“No, it wouldn’t be. That’s my last name.”

“Oh.”

“Try ‘Jim’.”

She does, but that makes her have to look for James. Which makes her look for Jacob. She sighs. Names are just as complicated as she feared. Jacob (and James, and Jim) mean “supplanter.” She shows it to Hopper and he shrugs. “Dictionary,” he says, and she sighs again but gets up. She returns to the couch a few seconds later. It’s a verb. To take the place of (another), as through force, scheming, strategy, or the like.

Eleven tilts to the page so Hopper can see it. He scans the entry. “... huh.” She makes a face and he laughs. She decides not to look at the meaning of the names anymore, and only choose a name if she likes the way it sounds. Because all of the names sound better than their meanings. She can’t resist taking a glance at Jane, and Eleanor, and El (she finds “Elle,” which is close enough) first. She doesn’t expect to find Eleven because Eleven isn’t a name that anyone else has. Just her. But when she finds Eleanor, she sees that Eleven is in the book after all. It looks different from the other names because it’s written in pen. And because it’s at the top of the page, above all of the other names. The words are tiny but she can read them easily.

Eleven: Hero. The most awesome person I know, and a name that deserves to be in this book.

Eleven reads the words a second time, and then a third, smiling at them. She doesn’t show this page to Hopper, because this page is all for her. Hopper sees the glowing look of happiness on her face and figures it out for himself.

Later that night, she takes the time to fix Mike’s entry. It doesn’t matter if he ever sees it or not, because she knows it’s there. And that makes her happy. She’s happy almost every day now, but she never takes it for granted. Happy is still new to her, and she treasures the feeling.

Eleven reads most of the names over the next few days, sometimes

marking her favorites with a pencil. Her kittens usually sleep in bed with her, or they play in bed while she tries to sleep. She tries to choose the Mike kitten's name first, since it's the only girl and she thinks it will be easier. Although she likes a lot of the names, none of them seem to fit. Not for her cats. She wants her cats to be named for the people who gave them to her, or at least words that describe them somehow. And none of the names in the book do that. She thinks about naming the Dustin kitten funny, but she can't do that, either, because all of her friends are funny. And nice. And awesome. She studies the names every night, but the only names that she really likes are the names they already have.

On Saturday, the party is gathered in Mike's basement. Hopper consented to stay at home, but forbade Eleven to go anywhere without asking permission first. Beforehand. He's already called twice asking how much longer is this going to take, anyway? Mike hedges when answering, because it's going to be a very long time. It's already been seven hours and they're only  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way through the campaign. It's taking a little longer than normal because of Eleven, although no one minds. Lucas in particular is excited to have it drag out as long as possible.

The party narrowly escapes a couple of goblins in the mountains, and Dustin and Lucas cheer. The cheers turn into an impressive display of cursing as they immediately run into some bandits. "Goddamn it, Mike. Seriously?" Dustin mumbles around a mouthful of chips. He offers the bag to Will who grabs a handful.

Mike shrugs and continues. "The bandits advance, drawing their weapons."

"We just loaded up on treasure, too," Dustin laments.

Mike ignores him. "El, what do you do?"

Eleven has her binder open in front of her. Mike's given her notes on her class and skills and a lot of other things. It's kind of like homework, but more fun. She looks down at the carefully printed handwriting. Considers the question, but the answer is simple. They



are Bad Men, in a way. And it is self-defense, because they are drawing their weapons. Not drawing like Will does. It means taking their weapons out to hurt them.

“Kill them.”

There’s a beat of silence, except for the sound of Max and Will chewing on potato chips.

“Okay, good, but what action?” Mike prompts her.

Eleven stares at him. “I would use my power and kill them,” she elaborates. There’s another moment of silence and Dustin stifles a giggle.

“Okay, cool, but what power?” Mike asks the question patiently, assuming that she’s referring to casting a spell. Eleven doesn’t answer with words; she just jerks her chin and tilts her head. Her power, obviously. Dustin and Lucas laugh and Mike smiles. Will’s still eating chips. Max nods approvingly.

“Well, yeah, you could do that in real life, but not in the game, remember? You’re a mage in the game, so you can do these things...” Mike scoots closer to her chair and points to the list he’s made in her binder. Eleven sighs. Her power is better than her abilities in the game, because she already knows how to use her power. It’s easy.

“Lightning bolt,” she says grudgingly, because that would be an interesting power. Mike grins at her as if he’s read the thought in her mind. Maybe he has. It’s definitely a possibility.

“Okay, now you roll for damage.”

Eleven looks at the dice in front of her and shakes her head. “No.”

“No? But you have to roll to see if you killed them. Or hurt them.”

“But I know I could do it.”

“I know that, but you still have to roll.”

“I’ve done it before.”

“She’s got a point, Mike,” Dustin interjects helpfully. Lucas snickers.

“Yeah, but you might not be able to in the game.”

Eleven scowls but rolls the dice. She knows it’s just pretend, but it’s a little frustrating. Her friends are in danger, and only the dice will decide if she can save them. She’s a lot more powerful in real life. She’d easily save her friends if there were bandits in the basement. She lets go of the dice. Lucas and Will groan. Eleven scowls again.

“Shit,” Dustin mutters.

“Your spell is weak and only glances off the bandits, leaving them almost totally unhurt. And really pissed off. One of them raises his sword-”

“I say she killed him,” Max offers. Eleven smiles at her and Max leans back in her chair, grinning.

“She didn’t.”

“She totally did. And I hit the other one with Steve’s bat,” Max says smugly. The guys laugh. Sans Mike, that is.

“Yes. She did,” Eleven confirms.

“Steve’s bat is not in this game,” Mike says seriously.

“Sure it is. Actually, Steve is, too. And he teaches the other bandit how to do his hair. And the bandit’s so happy with the results he gives us some money for our troubles and goes on his way,” Dustin adds.

“Taking the other bandit’s corpse with him, but leaving his bag of treasure,” Lucas says.

“Exactly. He feels really bad about attacking now. He invites us to a party later to make up for it.” The table breaks up into giggles. Even Mike laughs before attempting to bring them to order.

“Maybe our cleric can handle this one,” Mike says.

“Don’t worry, El, I’ll take care of these assholes,” Will reassures her. Eleven barely hears him. She doesn’t hear the table erupt in groans and jeers that indicate Will wasn’t successful, either. She doesn’t hear anything, because she knows exactly what to name her kittens.

She looks up from her binder and meets Mike’s eyes. His eyes are a little worried, like he’s afraid she’s not having fun. She smiles at him to reassure him and he returns it. She doesn’t tell them then, because they’re in the middle of a game. And they’ve been in the middle of a game for almost eight hours.

She waits for the right moment, when they’re at the Hopper household the next day. It’s a Sunday, and they usually don’t come over on Sundays, but she’s called them and asked them to come. And they do, because she rarely calls anyone except Mike. It’s definitely out of the ordinary, and they decide to forgo the grocery shopping this week. Lucas grumbles but it’s good-natured grumbling. They sit on the couch, watching her curiously, because she looks excited.

“What’s up?” Will asks her.

“I named them.”

They grin at her expectantly. Dustin mumbles something about Hank.

“What did you name them?” Mike prompts, because she hasn’t elaborated. She’s looking around for the kittens to introduce them properly. She sees one of them under the coffee table and reaches for him.

“I guess you were right about the book,” Will tells Mike.

Eleven straightens up, holding the Lucas kitten.

“I didn’t use the book.” And in case Mike feels hurt, she adds, “I thought of other names instead.” She almost adds “better names” but decides not to, because that might hurt his feelings. The names in the book were nice, but they weren’t right.

She looks at Mike and he reads the thought in her eyes easily. He

smiles to reassure her. "It's okay, you can name them whatever you want. They're yours. What did you come up with?"

She hands the Lucas kitten to Lucas. "This is Ranger."

"I think I know where this is going," Lucas says, and Dustin hits him lightly to shut him up. He complies, still grinning. He's surprisingly flattered that the cat's still named after him. It almost makes him forget how many months of his allowance it cost him. Is still costing him, actually.

She doesn't have to give Will the Will kitten, because that kitten has already jumped in his lap. She points to him instead. "Cleric."

The Dustin kitten is sitting on her shoe and looking off into space. He does that a lot. They all do, and there's never anything there. She picks him up and pets him before handing Dustin his namesake. "Bard."

The Mike kitten is on top of the TV and snoozing. She doesn't offer her to Mike because she doesn't want to wake her up. She strokes a hand down her back gently and looks back at her friends.

"Hank," Dustin teases, and she laughs, shaking her head.

"Paladin."

"I like it," Mike says, and Eleven looks pleased. The other boys echo their approval and the matter is finally settled. Dustin elbows Lucas to move over and she squeezes in between Mike and Dustin on the couch. Will turns on the TV and the Mike kitten-Paladin, she reminds herself, stretches at the sudden noise. She smiles at her kitten happily. It took over a month but the kittens finally have names. The perfect names, in Eleven's opinion, because they're still named for the people who gave them to her. Her best friends. They're her first friends, but even if she has a thousand friends someday, they'll always be at the very top of her list.